

December 14, 2004: The Anti-Poverty Conference
Kevin Ryan Keynote

The historical account of Christ's birth reminds all of us who love children that we must create a better world for their families.

The story is of course familiar. A young transient couple, temporarily homeless, find themselves in a desperate situation.

She is in labor, they are far from family, and the cold night hovers.

They begin to despair. They move from motel to motel, but there are no vacancies, and as the night wears on, they ultimately seek protection from the cold in a barn.

There, Mary gives birth, and they wrap the child in some rags and lay him in the hay near the sheep and the donkeys. Imagine the cold, and the smell, and the exhaustion.

The original story tells us that angels and kings and drummer boys and shepherds

flocked to the manger and paid tribute to the child.

But how would we respond to this family today? Perhaps a DYFS worker, dispatched into the night, and fearful for the baby's safety, would remove the child. Is it possible that our 21st century response at the nativity would be to make the infant Jesus a foster child?

Perhaps. And this is a great worry, for not in a million years will we ever do justice to the needs of children if we do not recognize that the key to keeping children safe and healthy is to build up our communities and strengthen our families.

Our shared humanity gives us hope that we who so frequently define ourselves through gender, politics, race or religion, can transcend those differences and build lasting alliances with others who struggle for justice for families.

The number of New Jersey families living in poverty jumped nearly 14 percent from 2002 to 2003, with more than three-quarters of those families raising children.

While New Jersey has the highest household income in the nation, nearly 250,000 of our children live in poverty. The child poverty rate actually increased in 2002 and in 2003.

Being an advocate means demanding that our government use our tax dollars to protect children, support families and invigorate communities. Safe, affordable housing is child protection. Jobs at a living wage for parents is child protection.

We need to wage a war on poverty, for poverty is the shadow of darkness that hovers over the heads of our children.

It cramps their bellies and chills their feet. It neglects their minds, and erodes their health. In fact, this is the first generation of children expected to have a shorter life span than their parents because of the epidemic onset of Type Two Childhood Diabetes and the inaccessibility of affordable health care.

Our children and grandchildren going to their graves younger than us is a reflection of you and me. We can and should prevent it.

Act now. This is the time of year to be heard, because hearts are opening. The season of Christmas, of Hanukkah, of Kwanza and Solstice, allows us to be heard because our neighbors are listening in a different way this time of year.

We can champion the strategies that lift children out of poverty: employment for their parents at a living wage; expanding Family Care; raising the minimum wage; expanding the earned income tax credit; progressive family leave policies; safe and affordable housing; excellence in education; more foster and adoptive homes for children whose families cannot or will not care for them.

I believe we can create a world of great moral ambition to save every child. But first we must believe that every single child is worth the world.